



# RECOVERING

# THE POWER OF PENTECOST

What might happen if the Holy Spirit were given full reign in the Church?

*The United Methodist Church isn't the only denomination in need of spiritual renewal. Over the last decade, the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. has lost approximately 25% of its total membership. Spiritual vitality has been low. Last year several evangelically-oriented renewal groups within the church held a National Congress on Renewal, attended by 7,000 Presbyterians. A tremendously exciting and hopeful address was given at the meeting by Rev. Samuel Moffett, a former missionary to China and Korea. His remarks have great relevance to United Methodists.*

**T**he greatest of all the great promises of God is found in the first chapter of Acts: "You shall receive *power* when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall by My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8, *italics mine*).

Strictly speaking, no single promise of God is any greater than His other promises. But to me this is the greatest, because it is what I need most. You see, I'm a Presbyterian. I have order and decency up to here. *But where's the power?*

This promise is also the greatest of the five forms in which the Great Commission comes to us. Oh, I know that, strictly speaking, no one form of God's commissioning is greater than any other. But to me this is the greatest, because it is the one I need most. You see, I'm a Presbyterian. I have sentimental, upper-middle-class virtues up to here. *But where's the power?*

Where's the power to propel us out of our comfortable, encapsulated churches and across the world? Our members are leaving; our missions declining. Where's the power? If the power is what God promises, isn't that what we need most today? So, let's begin with *the promise*.

"You shall receive power . . ." I'm not so sure that Jesus' disciples really believed that promise. They were too much like us. They were about as unrenewed, powerless, unfocused, and puzzled a group as are most of us American Christians. And like us Presbyterians, those disciples were losing members.

A few days before, they had been 12. Now there were only 11 in the inner circle. That's a worse percentage than even we Presbyterians can boast. About 40,000 members a year, isn't it, that we're losing? One out of

every 80 or so. The disciples lost 1 out of 12!

So, disturbed and anxious, they turned to Jesus. But the first question they asked Him was the wrong question. All they wanted to know was, When does the revolution begin? When will you bring in the Kingdom? (i.e., Acts 1:6). They were still thinking in political terms, which is all right in its place, but this was neither the place nor the time for that question and Jesus turned them away.

"It is not for you to know," He said (Acts 1:7). But because He loved them, He gave them a promise, a promise centered in a different kind of kingdom. "You shall receive power. . . when the Holy Spirit has come, and you will be my witnesses . . . to the remotest part of the earth." Then He left them.

He left them with many questions unanswered. He left them still unrenewed, still puzzled, still powerless. Yet, isn't that how renewal always begins—not with power for the ambitious and powerful but with a promise of power for those who have never had power, or have lost it?

Whether or not, at that moment when Jesus was about to leave them, the disappointed little group of disciples believed His promise, they did the right thing. They trudged back down the hill into the city and "with one accord devoted themselves to prayer" (Acts 1:14, RSV).

Gave themselves to prayer? Weren't there more important things to engage the attention of serious men and women? There were rumors of a conspiracy against the life of the emperor Tiberias in Rome—a good time for a revolution—and of a threatened famine spreading in North Africa. There also was news that the German barbarians were raiding again across the Rhine.

**M**ost people still think those are the kinds of issues that matter, and they do matter. But all the disciples did was go home and pray!

Prayer, says our secular world, is merely the Christian's escape from reality. It's a cop-out.

That is what my wife was told at a Presbyterian meeting not long after we came back from Korea to America. She was speaking about the vitality and enthusiasm of the Korean Christians in prayer, singing, and personal witness. One woman asked her, "What did you do for the people imprisoned by the government over there?"

It was a good question. It needed to be asked, and it was not asked unkindly. Eileen paused and answered, "Well, there wasn't too much we could do. We thought many had been imprisoned unjustly, and we visited them when we could. And we prayed for them regularly." That was when someone whispered audibly, "Cop-out!"

At times I, too, have been more tempted to revolution than to prayer. And apparently it was revolution the disciples were thinking about when they asked Jesus, "Lord, is it at this time you are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" Yet, as they gathered in the upper room, remembering how Jesus had answered them, instead of

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waging revolution they prayed.

When I was arrested in China during the revolution there, I wondered what was going to happen to me. During that time, the knowledge that Christians were praying for me encouraged and sustained me far more than any hope I might have had that another revolution, a counter-revolution, would come and make everything all right.

Here is the paradox. Revolutions make the headlines. Prayer doesn't. But the world has forgotten about the plot against Tiberias that set tongues wagging in Jerusalem while the disciples prayed. The world has forgotten the border raids across the Rhine. But the world has never forgotten that credulous, leaderless, out-cast little band which trudged down the hill into Jerusalem—and took time to pray.

There was a time in Korea, about 80 years ago, when missionaries and Korean Christians were so discouraged about the prospects for the future of the church there that they began to wonder if their 20 years of pioneering ministry had been all in vain. The country was losing its independence to the Japanese. The missionaries were tired. The Korean Christians, like the Ephesian church described in Revelation, seemed to have lost the love they had at first.

Then it was that a Canadian medical doctor called them not to give up, but to pray. The little prayer meetings and Bible studies he started were the beginnings of the great Korean revival of 1904-1908. What happened?

What happened was *power*. This leads to my second point. *God keeps His promises.*

God promised power to the powerless disciples on the hill outside Jerusalem. They went back into the city and prayed, and the power came. Suddenly, at Pentecost, "there came from heaven a noise like a violent, rushing wind . . . and fire . . ." (Acts 2:2,3).

The Spirit came, and life flamed again within them, as in coals dropped from a fireplace, apparently dead but breaking open in a shower of sparks. The Spirit brought flame back into the blue, bleak hearts of the disciples.

I must confess that the record of that first Pentecost—all wind and fire and many tongues—is a disconcerting passage to read today in a group of Presbyterians like this. This account smacks too much of hot gossellers and holy rollers and quakers and shakers and enthusiasts. It doesn't describe all that is best and most beautiful in Christian worship, does it?

Yet, the more I read of the history of the Church, the more I am impressed with the following fact: Some of the most creative and effective periods in the Church have been precisely those periods when the Gospel was "hot," not when it was most respectable.

If I were to pick my favorite spot in medieval Romanism I would choose the days of that gentle madman, St. Francis of Assisi. Some of the greatest moments of Protestantism were in the times of Puritan enthusiasts and "great awakeners" like Jonathan Edwards. Too hot for Yale! (I'm glad Presbyterian Princeton took him in.)

Quakers really quaked once, in the days of their intense beginnings. And when Methodism burned its way into the history of England and America, strong men and women roared and shook under the power of preachers like Wesley and Whitefield and Peter Cartwright.

Long-haired dandies would come to Cartwright's camp meetings. "They came to scoff," he wrote, "but they stayed to pray." Suddenly seized by the power, their backs would bend almost to the breaking. Then, the tension suddenly released by the peace of the Spirit, they would straighten up with such force that their long hair cracked like whips.

**S**trange, bizarre, and to me, a little frightening. Yet, as someone has said, "The Church of Christ has had more power when the world thought it was drunk, as at Pentecost, than when the world thought it was dead." Before we condemn the outer extravagances of those events it might be well to ask two questions. First, is all that excitement necessary for renewal? And second, when it does occur, what is the inward, quickening power that produces it?

The answer to the first question is no. Not all revivals are fiery, and renewal can be as quiet as an inner thought. Almost always, revival and renewal begin with prayer, and the best prayers are usually quiet.

The revival of 1857 in New York, for example, was just a prayer meeting. No fire. No shouting.

A city missionary in lower Manhattan passed out handbills inviting anyone interested to join him on Wednesdays for a prayer meeting. The first day, six people came. Within six months, 10,000 New York businessmen were gathering every day for prayer. Within two years a million converts had joined American churches. Just a prayer meeting, but what a prayer meeting!

The Great Revival in Korea was another matter. There was nothing low-key about that. It began with quiet prayer meetings, yes. But it exploded into waves of wailing, weeping, and writhing in agonies of confession.

The American missionaries were terrified. They stopped the meeting. They were "frightened by the presence of a Power which could work . . . wonders," as one of my father's colleagues described it (Blair, *Gold in Korea*, p. 64). But the meetings could not be stopped. They went on and on, and gradually even the most traditional-minded missionaries recognized that, however disturbing its manifestations might appear, the power was not to be

feared, and could not be resisted. It came from God.

However, the fire was not the power. The fire was only an outward sign of the power. Shouting and weeping are not the power. There is no one way to describe the power. Sometimes it shakes and shouts. Sometimes the quiet words describe it best, words like *cleansing*, *joy* and *love*. These three ingredients were present in the power that came at Pentecost.

The power was not the wind and the fire. The power was *the Spirit* who, with the Father and the Son, is the One God who creates, sustains, and energizes all that ever was or is or will be. The Spirit is the promised Power. But an important practical question remains: What is the power for?

*The power is for witness.*

What happened when the power came that first day of Pentecost? Peter went out to preach. Pentecost was more than an experience of renewal. It was more than a season of rejoicing. It was a call to mission.

Tradition tells us that every one of the 11 disciples at Pentecost became a missionary. James went to the Arabs, Andrew to the Goths, Peter to the Romans, and so on. Even doubting Thomas, according to the tradition, went to far-off India.

Has not the Lord said, "You shall receive power . . . and you shall be my witnesses . . . to the remotest part of the earth"? Power is for witness, and witness is for the whole world.

What happened when the power came in Korea back in 1907?

It was during that revival that the first Korean presbytery was formed. At that first presbytery meeting, the first seven graduates of the little theological seminary, which had been founded a few years earlier, were ordained.

They were awed and a little daunted by thoughts of what this would mean in terms of the spiritual responsibilities their ordination would bring to each of them. Then another thought occurred to them. Just as they were about to come into the meeting one of them said, "We will be the first Korean ministers of the Korean church. But a real church has more than ministers. It has missionaries."

**T**hey looked hard at a burly young man who had come a little late into their class at the seminary. "You stoned the first missionary you ever saw, didn't you?" they said. And he hung his head. It was true. "Then you are going to be our first missionary," they said, and walked in to be ordained.

The moderator of the presbytery, my father, who happened to be the missionary that man had stoned 16 years earlier, ordained the man who had stoned him. And the church sent him off as its own first missionary, to a strange island off the southern coast where he in turn was stoned when he stood up to preach the Gospel. Power is for witness.

*But where is the power?* I love the Church and I

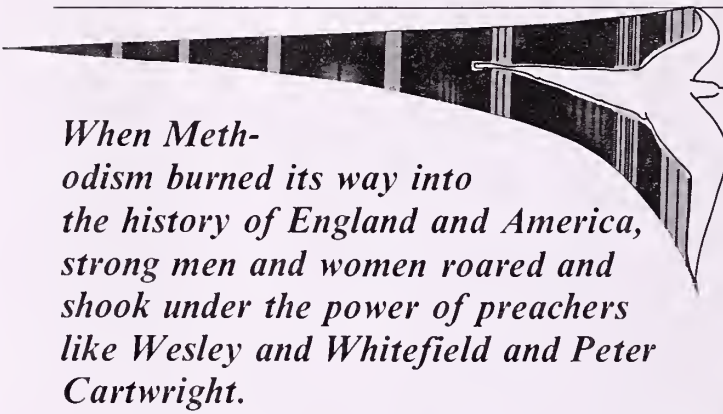
believe in it. I love our own Presbyterian segment of the Body of Christ most of all. But where is the power?

At Pentecost, the power in a little group of about 120 men and women swept 3,000 people into the fellowship in one day. In the American church, according to statistics I saw some years ago, it takes 54 Christians working a whole year to bring just one new member into the church.

Among Presbyterians we lose more than we win. Has the power gone?

Since coming back from Korea I have found more life in this old church than some give it credit for, but I must admit our statistical record is utterly appalling. Now, I do not worship statistics of church growth. Nevertheless, compare the Presbyterian record in America with Korea.

In 1974 there were one-and-a-half million Presbyterians in Korea. Ten years later, in 1984, there were between four and five million. Doesn't this say something about the distribution of spiritual power in the two churches,



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here and there? While Korean Presbyterians were tripling their membership, we American Presbyterians were losing about a third of ours, and cutting back on the number of our overseas missionaries.

Has the power gone? Forty years ago I was so discouraged about the Presbyterian church that I wrote to my father, "I don't think I'll go to Princeton. I'm not sure I want to be a Presbyterian."

My wise father wrote back: "Sam, you'll find a lot of good Christians outside the Presbyterian church and a lot of good missionaries. But before you make your decision, why don't you look around and see if you can't find some places where the Holy Spirit is working through the Presbyterians. And if the Holy Spirit can work through the Presbyterian church, perhaps you can."

There is still power in our church. There is power because our Lord has promised power and the Spirit still works in the church. There comes a time to stop criticizing the church and try praying for it. Not for numbers, for more Presbyterians, but for the power Jesus promised—power for witness, power for mission.

When the power comes, don't keep it for Presbyterians. Take it out across the world in mission.

Two thirds of this world does not have enough to eat today. It goes to bed hungry every night. *Mission is*

*feeding.* Most of the world suffers and lies in pain. *Mission is healing.* More than half of the adult world is blind; it doesn't know how to read. *Mission is opening the eyes and teaching to read.* Most of the world is oppressed by unjust powers. *Mission is liberation.*

So go forth and heal and feed and liberate. We can and must join in the struggle against all the world's ills—hunger, sickness, suffering, slavery—but that will not complete the mission. The greatest need will still be unmet.

When the power comes, we must also go forth and preach the good news. Two-thirds of the world is still without an effectual knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The power is already here! The trouble is with us. We do not call for the power, so we don't get it. Then we complain that we don't have it.

We are more naive even than the Arab chieftains which Lawrence of Arabia brought with him to the Paris Peace Conference. These men of the desert were amazed at many things, but nothing astonished them half so much as the running water in their hotel rooms. They knew the scarcity of water and its value. Yet, there it was to be had by the turning of a tap, free and seemingly exhaustless.

When they prepared to leave Paris, Lawrence found them trying to detach the faucets so that out in their dry deserts they might always have water. He tried to explain that behind the flowing taps were huge reservoirs, and that without this supply the faucets were useless. But the Arabs insisted. They were sure that the magic instruments would give them water forever.

Are we not even more credulous in our Christian lives? Those chieftains expected water from unattached faucets. We look for water to run from a closed tap. In the Holy Spirit are deep reservoirs of power, wells of water springing up into everlasting life. But the Holy Spirit cannot flow through a closed tap. He cannot work though an unyielded life.

So open up the taps. But watch out. The promise is for any who will believe and receive. And when by faith and grace we turn the taps and the power flows, watch out! The Spirit works when, where, and how He pleases.

When the power comes, it is not you but the Spirit who controls the temperature. You may pray for the fire, and the Spirit may choose to send a cool, refreshing rain and a still, small voice. Or you may think you will be more comfortable with the still, small voice, and, as in Korea, there may come the fire and the earthquake.

But don't ask me again, "Where's the power?" It is already here.

It is the same Spirit, the same promise, and the same power that has always been here. For Jesus is still saying to his disciples: "You shall receive power when the Spirit comes . . . and you shall be my witnesses." Witnesses to the ends of this dry and thirsty, this sick and hungry, this oppressed, frightened, lost world. You shall be witnesses that the Savior has come and will come again—and that the Spirit is already here. Ω